

On Theatrical Imitation

An Essay Drawn from Plato's Dialogues¹



Notice

This short Writing is merely a kind of extract of various places where Plato treats theatrical Imitation. I hardly had any other part in it other than that of having assembled and connected them into the form of a continuous discourse instead of that of the Dialogue which they had in the original. The occasion for this labor was the Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre;² but not having been able to fit it into that work comfortably, I put it aside in order to use it elsewhere or to suppress it entirely. Since then, having left my hands, this writing happened to be involved—I know not how—in a transaction which did not concern me. The Manuscript has been returned to me, but the Bookseller has demanded it back as acquired by him in good faith, and I do not want to gainsay the person who gave it to him. This is how this bagatelle makes its way today into Print.³

On Theatrical Imitation

The more I ponder the establishment of our imaginary Republic, the more it seems to me that we have prescribed for it laws that are useful and appropriate to the nature of man. I find, above all, that it was important to set, as we have done, limits to the license of Poets and to forbid them all the parts of their art that are related to imitation. We shall even take up this subject again, if you wish, now that more important things have been examined, and, in the hope that you will not denounce me to those dangerous enemies, I will admit to you that I regard all the dramatic Authors as the corrupters of the People, or of whoever, allowing himself to be amused by their images, is not capable of considering them under their true aspect, nor of giving to these fables the corrective they need. Whatever respect I may have for Homer, their model and their first master, I do not believe that I owe more to him than to the truth; and in order to begin by assuring myself of it, I will first inquire into what imitation is.⁴

In order to imitate a thing, one must have the idea of it. This idea is abstract, absolute, unique, and independent of the number of examples of

this thing which may exist in Nature. This idea is always anterior to its execution: for the Architect who builds a Palace has the idea of a Palace before beginning his own. He does not fabricate its model, he follows it, and this model is in his mind in advance.⁵

Limited by his art to that sole object, this Artist knows how to make only his Palace or other similar Palaces; but there are much more universal ones who can make everything that can be executed in the world by any Workman whatsoever, everything that Nature produces, everything that can be made visible in the heavens, on the earth, in the underworld, the Gods themselves. You well understand that these so very marvelous Artists are the Painters, and even the most ignorant of men can do as much with a mirror. You will say to me that the Painter does not make these things, but their images; the Workman who actually fabricates them does as much, since he copies a model which existed before them.

I see there three quite distinct Palaces.⁶ First, the model or the original idea which exists in the understanding of the Architect, in nature, or at the very least in its Author along with all the possible ideas of which he is the source; in the second place, the Architect's Palace, which is the image of this model; and, finally, the Painter's Palace, which is the image of that of the Architect. Thus, God, the Architect, and the painter are the authors of these three Palaces. The first Palace is the original idea, existing by itself; the second is its image; the third is the image of the image, or what we properly call imitation. From whence it follows that the imitation does not, as is believed, hold the second rank in the order of beings, but the third, and that, no image being exact and perfect, the imitation is always one degree further from the truth than is thought.

The Architect can make several Palaces on the same model, the Painter several paintings of the same Palace; but as for the original type or model, it is unique; for if it should be supposed that there are two alike, they would no longer be original, they would have an original model common to them both, and it is this one alone that would be the true one. Everything that I say here of painting is applicable to theatrical imitation; but before coming to that, let us examine the Painter's imitations in more detail.

Not only does he imitate only the images of things in his pictures, namely, the perceptible productions of nature and the works of Artists; he does not even seek to render the truth of the object exactly, but the appearance; he paints it such as it appears to be, and not such as it is. He paints it from a single point of view, and choosing this point of view at his will, he renders, in accordance with what suits him, the same object to the eyes of the spectators as pleasant or deformed. Thus, they are never re-

sponsible for judging the thing imitated in itself, but they are forced to judge it based on a certain appearance and as it pleases the imitator: often they even judge it only by habit, and something arbitrary enters even into the imitation.*⁷

The Art of representing objects is very different from that of making them understood. The first pleases without instruction; the second instructs without pleasure. The Artist who draws up a plan and takes exact dimensions does nothing very pleasant for the sight; in addition, his work is sought out only by people in the art. But the one who draws a perspective flatters the people and the ignorant because he makes nothing understood by them and offers them only the appearance of what they already knew. Add to this that measurement, giving us successively one dimension and then the other, instructs us slowly about the truth of things, whereas the appearance offers us the whole at one time, and, under the presumption of a greater capacity of mind, flatters the senses by seducing amour-propre.

The representations of the Painter, deprived of all reality, produce even this appearance only with the help of some vain shadows and of some flimsy simulacra that he causes to be taken for the thing itself. If there was

* Experience teaches us that beautiful harmony does not at all flatter an unprepared ear, that it is habit alone that makes consonances pleasant to us and makes us distinguish the most discordant intervals. As for the simplicity of ratios on which some have wished to found the pleasure of harmony, I have shown in the *Encyclopédia* at the word *Consonance* that this principle is unsustainable, and I believe it is easy to prove that all our harmony is a barbarous and gothic invention which has become an art of imitation only by the stretch of time.⁸ A studious Magistrate who, in his moments of leisure, instead of going to hear music amused himself with delving into systems, has found that the ratio of the fifth is two to three only by approximation, and that this ratio is strictly incommensurable.⁹ At least no one can deny that this is so on our harpsichords by virtue of temperament, which does not prevent these fifths thus tempered from seeming pleasant to us. Now, where, in such a case, is the simplicity of ratio which should make them so for us? We still do not at all know whether our system of music is not founded on pure conventions; we do not at all know whether its principles are not completely arbitrary and whether an entirely different system, substituted for that one, would not succeed, by habit, in pleasing us equally well. This is a question discussed elsewhere.¹⁰ By a fairly natural analogy these reflections might awaken others on the subject of painting regarding the tone of a picture, the concord of colors, certain parts of the design in which perhaps more arbitrariness enters than is thought, and in which imitation itself might have rules of convention. Why do Painters not dare undertake new imitations which have nothing against them but their novelty and otherwise seem entirely within the competence of the art? For example, it is a game for them to make a plane surface appear to be in relief. Why, then, doesn't anyone among them not attempt to give the appearance of a plane surface to a relief? If they make a ceiling seem to be a vault, why do they not make a vault appear to be a ceiling? Shadows, they will say, change appearance from different points of view, which does not happen in the same way with plane surfaces. Let us remove this difficulty and ask a Painter to paint and color a statue in such a way that it appears flat, level, and of the same color, without any design, in a single light, and from a single point of view. These new considerations would perhaps not be unworthy of being examined by the enlightened amateur who has philosophized about this art so well.¹¹

any admixture of truth in his imitations, he would have had to know the objects he imitated; he would be a Naturalist, a Workman, a Physicist, before being a Painter. But, on the contrary, the compass of his art is founded only on his ignorance, and he paints everything only because he does not need to know anything. When he offers us a Philosopher in meditation, an Astronomer observing the stars, a Geometer drawing figures, a Lathe Worker in his workshop, does he thereby turn, calculate, meditate, or observe the stars? Not at all; he merely paints. Not in a position to give a rational account of any of the things that are in his picture, he takes advantage of us doubly by his imitations, either by offering us a vague and deceptive appearance, the error of which neither he nor we would know how to distinguish, or by employing false measurements in order to produce this appearance, that is, by distorting all the genuine dimensions in accordance with the laws of perspective; so that, if the senses of the spectator are not led astray and limit themselves to seeing the picture as it is, he will be mistaken about all the relations of the things that are presented to him or will find them all false. Nevertheless, the illusion will be such that simpletons and children will be taken in by it, they will believe they are seeing the objects which the Painter himself did not know and workers in arts about which he understands nothing.

Let us learn by this example to mistrust those universal people, skilled in all the arts, versed in all the sciences, who know everything, who reason about everything, and seem to unite in themselves alone the talents of every mortal. If someone tells us that he knows one of these wondrous men, let us assure him without hesitating that he is the dupe of the magic tricks of a charlatan and that all the knowledge of this great Philosopher is founded only on the ignorance of his admirers, who do not know how to distinguish error from truth, nor imitation from the thing imitated.¹²

This leads us to the examination of the tragic Authors and of Homer, their leader.* For some maintain that a tragic Poet must know everything, that he profoundly understands virtues and vices, politics and morality, divine and human laws, and that he must possess the science of all the things he treats or that he will never do anything well. Let us seek to discover, then, whether those who elevate the Poet to this degree of sublimity do not also allow themselves to be imposed upon by the imitating art of the Poets; whether their admiration for these immortal works does not prevent them from seeing how far they are from the truth, from feeling that these are colors without consistency, vain phantoms, shadows, and

* It was the common sentiment of the Ancients that their tragic Authors were merely the copyists and imitators of Homer. Someone said of Euripides' Tragedies: *They are the leftovers from Homer's banquets which a guest took home with him.*¹³

that, in order to draw such images, there is nothing less necessary than the knowledge of the truth; or indeed, whether there is any real utility in all this and whether the Poets actually know this multitude of things about which the vulgar find they speak so well.

Tell me, my friends, if someone could have his choice between the portrait of his mistress and the original, which do you think he would choose? If some Artist could equally make the thing imitated or its simulacrum, would he prefer the latter, in objects of any worth, and would he content himself with a house in painting when he could make himself one in actuality? If, then, the tragic Author really knew the things he claims to paint, if he had the qualities he describes, if he himself did everything he makes his characters do, would he not exercise their talents? Would he not practice their virtues? Would he not raise monuments to his glory rather than to theirs? And would he not prefer that he himself do laudable actions rather than limit himself to lauding those of someone else? Certainly his merit would be totally otherwise, and there is no reason why, being capable of more, he would limit himself to less. But what to think of the one who wants to teach us what he has not been able to learn? And who would not laugh at seeing an imbecilic group go to admire all the springs of politics and of the human heart put into play by a twenty-year-old scatterbrain to whom the least sensible person in the assembly would not want to confide the least of his affairs?

Let us leave off what concerns talents and arts. When Homer speaks so well of Machaon's knowledge,¹⁴ we do not at all demand from him an account of his own on the same matter. We do not at all inquire about the illnesses he has cured, the students he has had in medicine, the masterpieces of engraving and of silver-smithing he has completed, the Workmen he has formed, the monuments to his industry. Let us endure him teaching us all this without knowing whether he has been instructed in them. But when he converses about war, government, laws, sciences, which demand the longest study and which matter most to men's happiness, let us dare interrupt him a moment and interrogate him in this way: O divine Homer! We admire your lessons, and in order to follow them we await only to see how you practice them yourself; if you are really what you strive to appear to be; if your imitations are not of the third rank, but the second after the truth, let us see in you the model which you paint for us in your works; show us the Captain, the Legislator, and the Wise Men whose portrait you so boldly offer us. Greece and the entire World celebrate the blessings of great men who possess these sublime arts whose precepts cost you so little. Lycurgus gave laws to Sparta, Charondas to Sicily and to Italy, Minos to the Cretans, Solon to us.¹⁵ Is it a matter of life's duties, of

the wise government of the household, of the conduct of a citizen in every state? Thales of Miletus and the Scythian Anacharsis gave the example and the precepts at the same time.¹⁶ Is it necessary to learn these same duties from others and to instruct Philosophers and Wise Men who practice what they have been taught? This Zoroaster did for the Magis, Pythagoras for his disciples, Lycurgus for his fellow-citizens.¹⁷ But you, Homer, if it is true that you have excelled in so many fields, if it is true that you can instruct men and make them better, if it is true that to the imitation you have joined intelligence and to speeches knowledge, let us see the works that prove your skill, the States you have instituted, the virtues that honor you, the disciples you have produced, the battles you have won, the riches you have acquired. Have you not won over crowds of friends who make you loved and honored by everyone? How can it be that you have attracted to yourself only Cleophon alone?¹⁸ You still made only an ingrate. What! A Protagoras of Abdera, a Prodicus of Ceos, without departing from a simple and private life have gathered their contemporaries around themselves, have persuaded them to learn from them alone the art of governing their country, their family, and themselves;¹⁹ and these very wondrous men, a Hesiod, a Homer, who knew everything, who could teach everything to the men of their time, were neglected by them to the point of going wandering, begging everywhere in the universe, and singing their verses from city to city, like vile Mountebanks! In those coarse centuries, where the weight of ignorance began to make itself felt, where the need and the avidity for knowledge concurred to make every man a little more instructed than the others useful and respectable, if they had been as learned as they seemed to be, if they had had all the qualities they made shine with such pomp, they would have passed for prodigies; they would have been sought after by everyone; each would have rushed to have them, possess them, retain them in their homes; and those who could not establish them with themselves would have followed them all over the earth rather than lose such a rare occasion of being instructed and of becoming Heroes like those they were made to admire.*

Let us agree, then, that all the Poets, beginning with Homer, represent to us in their pictures not the model of virtues, of talents, of qualities of the soul, nor the other objects of the understanding and of the senses they do not themselves have, but the images of all these objects drawn from for-

* Plato did not wish to say that a man competent in his interests and versed in lucrative affairs might not, by trafficking in Poetry, or by other means, attain a great fortune. But it is very different to enrich oneself and to win renown by the Poet's trade than to enrich oneself and win renown by the talents the Poet claims to teach. It is true that one could cite the example of Tyrtaeus to Plato, but he could extricate himself from the situation with distinction by considering him rather as an Orator than as a Poet.²⁰

eign objects; and that they are thereby no nearer to truth in that when they offer to us the features of a Hero or of a Captain, that a Painter who, painting for us a Geometer or a Workman, is not concerned at all with the art of which he understands nothing but only with the colors and the shape. Thus, the names and the words cause an illusion for those who, sensitive to rhythm and to harmony, allow themselves to be charmed by the enchanting art of the Poet and yield to seduction by the attraction of the pleasure; so that they take the images of objects, which are not known either by themselves or by their authors, for the objects themselves, and who fear being undeceived about an error which flatters them, whether by throwing their ignorance off the track or by the pleasant sensations by which their ignorance is accompanied.

Indeed, take from the most brilliant of these pictures the charm of the verses and the foreign ornaments which embellish it, strip it of the Poet's coloration or of its style and leave it only the design, and you will have difficulty recognizing it, or, if it is recognizable, it will no longer please—like those children who, rather pretty than beautiful, adorned solely with the flower of their youth, alone lose all their graces along with it without having lost anything of their features.

Not only does the imitator or the author of the simulacrum know only the appearance of the thing imitated, but the genuine knowledge of that thing does not belong even to the one who has made it. I look into this picture of horses harnessed to Hector's chariot; these horses have harnesses, bits, reins; the Silversmith, the Blacksmith, the Saddler have made these various things: the Painter has represented them, but neither the Workman who makes them nor the Painter who draws them knows what they should be; it is for the Horseman or for the Driver who makes use of them to determine their form by their use; it is for him alone to judge whether they are well or badly made and to correct their defects. Thus, in every possible instrument there are three objects of practice to consider, namely, the use, the fabrication, and the imitation. These last two arts manifestly depend upon the first, and there is nothing imitable in nature to which one may not apply the same distinctions.

If the utility, the goodness, the beauty of an instrument, of an animal, of an action is related to the use drawn from it, if it belongs only to the one who puts them to work to give their model and to judge whether this model is faithfully executed, far from the imitator being in a position to pronounce upon the qualities of the things he imitates, this decision does not even belong to the one who has made them. The imitator follows the workman whose work he copies, the Workman follows the Artist who knows how to make use of them, and this last one alone assesses likewise

the thing and its imitation, which confirms that the pictures of the Poet and of the Painter occupy merely the third place after the first model or the truth.

But the Poet, who has as judge only the ignorant People whom he seeks to please, how will he not disfigure the objects he presents to them in order to flatter them?²¹ He will imitate what appears beautiful to the multitude without caring whether it is so in actuality. If he paints valor, will he have Achilles for a judge? If he paints ruse, will Ulysses take it up? Wholly the contrary: Achilles and Ulysses will be his characters, Thersites and Dolon his spectators.²²

You will object to me that the Philosopher himself does not know all the arts about which he speaks either, and that he often extends his ideas as far as the Poet extends his images.²³ I admit it; but the Philosopher does not present himself as knowing the truth: he seeks it, he examines, he discusses, he extends our views, he even instructs us by allowing himself to be misled; he proposes his doubts as doubts, his conjectures as conjectures, and he affirms only what he knows. The Philosopher who reasons submits his reasonings to our judgment; the Poet, and the imitator puts himself forward as judge. By offering us his images, he affirms that they conform to the truth: he is therefore obliged to know it, if his art has any reality; by depicting everything, he presents himself as knowing everything. The Poet is the Painter who makes the image; the Philosopher is the Architect who draws up the plan.²⁴ The one does not even dare approach the object in order to paint it; the other measures before drawing.

But for fear of being misled by false analogies, let us try to see more distinctly to what part, to what faculty of our soul, the imitations of the Poet are related and let us first consider from whence the illusion of those of Painter come.²⁵ The same bodies seen at various distances do not seem to be the same size, nor their shapes equally perceptible, nor their colors of the same vivacity. Seen in the water, they change appearance; what was straight appears broken; the object seems to float with the waves. Through a spherical or hollow glass all these relations of the features are changed; with the help of light and shadows a plane surface is raised or recessed to the Painter's liking; his brush engraves features as deeply as the Sculptor's chisel, and in the reliefs he knows how to draw on cloth, touch—contradicted by sight—leaves in doubt which of these two should be trusted. All these errors obviously have their source in the precipitous judgments of the mind. It is this weakness of human understanding, always in a hurry to judge without knowing, which gives rise to all those magical tricks by which Optics and Mechanics mislead our senses. We reach a conclusion, based on appearance alone, from what we do know to

what we do not know, and our false inductions are the source of a thousand illusions.

What resources are we offered against these errors? Those of examination and of analysis. The suspension of the mind, the art of measuring, of weighing, of counting, are the aids which man has for verifying the relations of the senses so that he does not judge what is large or small, round or square, rarefied or dense, far or near, by what they seem to be, but by what number, measure, and weight give to him as such. The comparison, the judgment of relations found by these various operations incontestably belongs to the reasoning faculty, and this judgment is often in contradiction with the one to which the appearance of things leads us. Now, we have seen beforehand that it can not be by the same faculty of the soul that it holds contrary judgments of the same things considered under the same relations.²⁶ From which it follows that it is not at all the most noble of our faculties, namely reason, but a different and inferior faculty which judges by appearance and yields to the charm of the imitation.²⁷ This is what I wanted to express beforehand in saying that Painting, and the art of imitating generally, practices its operations far from the truth of things by combining with a part of our soul deprived of prudence and reason and incapable of knowing by itself anything of reality and of truth.* Thus, the art of imitating, low by its nature and by the faculty of the soul on which it acts, can only be further so by its productions, at least as regards the material sense that makes us judge the Painter's pictures. Let us now consider the same art applied by the Poet's imitations immediately to the internal sense, that is, to the understanding.

The stage represents men acting voluntarily or by force, assessing their actions as good or bad according to the good or ill they think come to them from them, and variously affected, due to them, by pain or by sensual pleasure.²⁸ Now, by the reasons we have already discussed, it is impossible for the man, thus presented, ever to be in accord with himself; and as the appearance and the reality of sensible objects give him contrary opinions, likewise he assesses the objects of his actions differently, accordingly as they are far or near, conformable or opposed to his passions; and his judgments, mobile like them, constantly put his desires, his reason, his will, and all the powers of his soul into contradiction.

The stage therefore represents all men, and even those who are given to us as models, as otherwise affected than they should be to maintain them-

* This word *part* here must not be taken in a precise sense, as if Plato supposed the soul to be really divisible or composed. The division he assumes and which makes him use the word *part* regards only the various kinds of operations by which the soul is modified, and which are otherwise called *faculties*.

selves in the state of moderation which suits them.²⁹ Let a wise and courageous man lose his son, his friend, his mistress, finally, the object most dear to his heart: he will not be seen to abandon himself to an excessive and unreasonable grief; and if human weakness does not permit him to overcome his affliction completely, he will temper it by constancy; a just shame will make him close up within himself a part of his pains, and, constrained to appear to the eyes of men, he will blush to say and do in their presence some things which he does and says when alone. Not being able to be in himself such as he wishes, he at least tries to offer himself to others such as he should be. What troubles him and agitates him is grief and passion; what stops him and contains him is reason and law; and in these opposed movements his will always declares itself for the latter.

Indeed, reason desires that adversity be endured patiently, that its weight not be aggravated by useless complaints, that human things not be estimated above their worth, that, in weeping over one's ills, one not waste the forces one has to soften them, that, finally, one sometimes think that it is impossible for man to foresee the future and to know himself well enough in order to know whether what happens to him is a good or an evil for him.³⁰

Thus, the judicious and temperate man will comport himself as a victim of ill fortune. He will try to turn to profit his very reverses, as a prudent gambler seeks to take advantage of a bad mark that chance brings him; and, without lamenting like a child who falls and cries over the rock that has struck him, he knows how to bear, if necessary, a hot iron that is salutary for his wound and to make it bleed in order to heal it. We shall therefore say that constancy and firmness in the face of disgrace are the work of reason, and that mourning, tears, despair, moans belong to one part of the soul opposed to the other one, weaker, more cowardly, and much inferior in dignity.

Now, it is from this sensitive and weak part that the touching and varied imitations seen on the stage are drawn.³¹ The man who is firm, prudent, and always like himself is not so easy to imitate, and, even if he were, the imitation, being less varied, would not be as pleasant to the Vulgar; they would be interested with difficulty in an image which is not their own, and in which they recognized neither their morals, nor their passions: never does the human heart identify with objects that it feels are absolutely foreign to it. In addition, the skillful Poet, the Poet who knows the art of succeeding, seeking to please the People and vulgar men, is quite wary of offering them the sublime image of a heart that is master of itself, that hears only the voice of wisdom; but he charms the spectators by characters who are always in contradiction, who want and do not want, who

make the Theaters ring with cries and moans, who force us to pity them, even when they do their duty, and to think virtue is a sad thing since it makes its friends so miserable. It is by this means that, with easier and more diverse imitations, the Poet moves and further flatters the spectators.

This habit of submitting the people we are made to admire to their passions so spoils and changes our judgments about laudable things that we accustom ourselves to honor the soul's weakness under the name of sensitivity, and to treat those in whom the severity of duty prevails on every occasion over natural affections as hard men without feeling. On the contrary, we esteem as good-natured men those who, vividly affected by everything, are the perpetual playthings of events; those who cry like women at the loss of what was dear to them; those who are made unjust by a deranged friendship so as to serve their friends; those who know no other rule than the blind penchant of their heart; those who—always praised by the sex that subjugates them and that they imitate—have no virtues other than their passions, nor any merit other than their weakness. Thus, equality, force, constancy, the love of justice, the empire of reason imperceptibly become detestable qualities, vices that are decried; men are honored for everything that makes them worthy of scorn, and this inversion of healthy opinions is the infallible effect of the lessons one goes to receive at the Theater.

It is therefore with reason that we blamed the Poet's imitations and we put them into the same rank as those of the Painter, whether for being equally distant from the truth, or because both of them, likewise flattering the sensitive part of the soul and neglecting the rational, invert the order of our faculties and make us subordinate the better to the worse. As the one who would occupy himself in the Republic by submitting the good to the bad, and the true leaders to the rebels, would be an enemy of the Fatherland and a traitor to the State, so the Poet imitator carries dissensions and death into the Republic of the soul by elevating and nourishing the lowest faculties at the expense of the most noble, by lavishing and using his powers on those things least worthy of occupying him, by confounding through vain simulacra true beauty with the lying attraction that pleases the multitude and apparent grandeur with genuine grandeur.

What strong souls will dare believe themselves equal to the care the Poet takes to corrupt them or to discourage them? When Homer or some tragic Author shows us a Hero overburdened with affliction, crying out, lamenting, beating his breast; an Achilles, son of a Goddess, now stretched out on the earth pouring the warm sand over his head with his two hands, now wandering like a deranged man along the shore and mixing his frightening howls with the sound of the waves; a Priam, venerable by his dig-

nity, by his great age, by so many illustrious children, rolling in the mire, soiling his white hair, making the air ring with his curses, and shouting out at Gods and men: who among us, insensible to these plaints, does not yield to them with a sort of pleasure?³² Who does not feel the feeling represented to us arise in himself? Who does not seriously praise the Author's art and does not regard him as a great Poet due to the expression he gives to his portraits and the affections he communicates to us? And, nevertheless, when a domestic and real affliction reaches ourselves, we glory in bearing it moderately, in not letting ourselves be overwhelmed to the point of tears; we then regard the courage we force ourselves to have as a virtue of a man and we would believe ourselves as cowardly as women to cry and to groan like these Heroes who have touched us in the scene. Are these not very useful Spectacles rather than those which we would blush to imitate, and wherein we are interested in the weaknesses from which we take such trouble to protect ourselves in our own calamities? The most noble faculty of the soul, thus losing the power and the empire over itself, grows accustomed to bend under the law of the passions; it no longer represses our tears and our cries; it delivers us over to our tenderness for objects which are foreign to us; and under the pretext of commiseration for chimerical misfortunes, far from being indignant that a virtuous man abandons himself to excessive grieving, far from preventing us from applauding his degradation, it lets us applaud ourselves for the pity which it inspires in us; it is a pleasure we believe we have gained without weakness and taste without remorse.³³

But in allowing ourselves to be thus subjugated to the pains of another, how will we resist our own and how will we endure our own ills more courageously than those of which we perceive only a vain image? What! Will we be the only ones who do not have a hold over our sensitivity? Who is it that will not sometimes adopt those emotions to which he lends himself so willingly? Who is it that will know how to refuse his own misfortunes the tears he lavishes on those of another? I say as much of Comedy,³⁴ of the indecent laughter it draws from us, of the habit taken from it of turning everything to ridicule, even the most serious, the gravest objects, and of the almost inevitable effect by which it turns the most respectable Citizens into Theatrical buffoons and jokers. I say as much of love, of anger, and of all the other passions, which, becoming day by day more palpable by amusement and by play, we lose all our power to resist when they assail us in earnest. Finally, in whatever sense the Theater and its imitations are envisioned, one always sees that by animating and by fomenting in us dispositions which must be contained and repressed, it makes dominate what should obey; far from making us better and more happy, it

makes us worse and still more unhappy, and we are made to pay at our own expense for the care that is taken to please us and to flatter us.

When, therefore, friend Glaucus,³⁵ you encounter Homer's enthusiasts, when they tell you that Homer is the institutor of Greece and the master of all the arts, that the government of States, civil discipline, the education of men, and all the ordering of human life are taught in his writings, honor their zeal, love and support them as men endowed with exquisite qualities; admire along with them the wonders of this fine genius; agree with them with pleasure that Homer is the Poet *par excellence*, the model and the leader of all the tragic Authors. But always consider that the Hymns in honor of the Gods and the praises of great men are the sole type of Poetry which should be admitted into the Republic, and that, if it once allows within it that imitative Muse which charms us and deceives us by the sweetness of its accents, men's actions will soon no longer have as their object either the law or good and beautiful things, but pain and sensual pleasure; aroused passions will dominate instead of reason; the Citizens will no longer be virtuous and just men, always subject to duty and to equity, but sensitive and weak men who will do good or evil indifferently according as they are led by their inclination. Finally, never forget that by banishing Dramas and Theatrical Pieces from our State, we are not following a barbarous obstinacy and do not at all scorn the beauties of the art, but we prefer to them the immortal beauties that result from the harmony of the soul and from the concord of its faculties.

Let us do still more. In order to protect ourselves from all partiality and to grant nothing to that ancient discord that reigns between the Philosophers and the Poets,³⁶ let us not take from Poetry and from imitation anything they may allege in their defense, nor from ourselves the innocent pleasures they can procure for us. Let us render that honor to the truth of respecting even its image and of allowing all who celebrate it the freedom of making themselves heard. By imposing silence on the Poets, let us accord to their friends the freedom of defending them and of showing us, if they can, that the art condemned by us as harmful is not only pleasant, but useful to the Republic and to the Citizens. Let us listen to their reasons with an impartial ear and agree whole-heartedly that we have gained much for ourselves if they prove that one can yield oneself without risk to such sweet impressions. Otherwise, my dear Glaucus, as a wise man, smitten by the charms of a mistress, seeing his virtue ready to abandon him, breaks, although with regret, such a sweet chain and sacrifices love to duty and to reason; thus, given over from our childhood to the seductive attractions of Poetry and perhaps too sensitive to its beauties, we shall nonetheless provide ourselves with force and reason against its magic tricks. If we dare

grant something to the taste which attracts us, we will at least fear yielding ourselves to our first loves. We will always say to ourselves that there is nothing serious or useful in all that dramatic apparatus. In sometimes lending our ears to Poetry, we will prevent our hearts from being imposed upon by it and we will not allow it to trouble order and freedom, either in the interior Republic of the soul or in that of human society. The alternative of making oneself better or worse is no slight matter, and one cannot weigh with too much care the deliberation that conducts us. O my friends! It is, I admit, a sweet thing to yield to the charms of an enchanting talent, to acquire by means of it goods, honors, power, glory. But power, glory, riches, and pleasures are all eclipsed and disappear like a shadow before justice and virtue.

EDITOR'S NOTES TO
On Theatrical Imitation

This translation is based on the text found in Pléiade, 1195–1211. The work was first published in the 1764 Duchesne edition of Rousseau's works, and also in a separate edition in the same year by Guy, Duchesne's assistant, and in a counterfeit edition in the same year by Rousseau's former publisher, Rey.

1. The Pléiade edition of this writing does not contain the subtitle, even though the first edition of the work bears it.

2. Rousseau's *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre* was published in 1758. The *Letter* was in reaction to the article "Geneva" in the seventh volume of the *Encyclopédia*, in which d'Alembert suggested the establishment of a theater in Rousseau's fatherland, where theaters were prohibited.

3. The "transaction" in question was the separate publication of this writing by Guy, the "Bookseller" Duchesne's assistant. Rousseau sent Duchesne the writing in 1758 along with the plates to the *Nouvelle Héloïse* (see Leigh, VII, 363).

4. See Plato, *Republic*, X.595a–c.

5. Socrates uses the example of a bed maker. See Plato, *Republic*, X.596a–b.

6. See Plato, *Republic*, X.597b.

7. See Plato, *Republic*, X.598a–b.

8. See the version of the article CONSONANCE [*Consonnance*] in the *Dictionary of Music*, pp. 377–382 below. Rousseau terms modern harmony a "barbarous and gothic invention" in the article HARMONY [*Harmonie*] in the *Dictionary of Music*, p. 413 below.

9. Rousseau refers to M. de Moisgelou, (d. 1761), councilor in the Grand Council of Geneva. Rousseau speaks of Moisgelou in his article SYSTEM [*Système*] in the *Dictionary of Music*.

10. Rousseau discusses the difference among musical systems most especially in the article MUSIC [*Musique*] in the *Dictionary of Music*, translated below.

11. Rousseau may be referring to Diderot.

12. Compare the story of Emile and the "magician Socrates" in Rousseau's *Emile*, III (Pléiade, IV, 437–441; Bloom, 172–175).

13. The editor has not been able to identify the source of this quotation.

14. Machaon is the son of Asclepius, the legendary founder of the art of medicine. See Homer, *Iliad*, IV.192–218. See Plato, *Republic*, X.599b–c.

15. Lycurgus was the semimythical traditional founder of Sparta. Charondas (sixth century B.C.) was the lawgiver of Catana in Sicily. Minos was the semimythical founder and king of Crete. Solon (sixth–fifth century B.C.) was the Athenian statesman and poet who revised the Athenian legal and political system.

16. Thales of Miletus (sixth century B.C.) was a philosopher who is said to have given political advice to the Ionians. Anacharsis from Scythia (sixth century B.C.) was a sage who traveled widely in Greece.

17. Zoroaster was the mythical founder of Zoroastrianism, the Persian religion. Pythagoras (sixth century B.C.) was the founder of a philosophical cult. Lycurgus was the semimythical traditional founder of Sparta.

18. Cleophon was an Athenian politician contemporary with Socrates.

19. Protagoras of Abdera and Prodicus of Ceos were both well-known Sophists contemporary with Socrates. See Plato, *Republic*, X.600c–d. See Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 19d–20a; *Protagoras*, 310c–317c.

20. Tyrtaeus was an elegiac poet of the seventh century B.C., probably Spartan, who was also involved in the politics of his time.

21. See Plato, *Gorgias*, 501e–502b.

22. Thersites is an ugly, foul man who rails at Agamemnon until beaten into silence by Ulysses (Odysseus) (Homer, *Iliad*, II.211–270). Dolon is an ugly, cowardly Trojan scout killed by Diomedes and Odysseus (*ibid.*, X.313–464).

23. See Plato, *Laws*, VII.817b–d.

24. Compare Rousseau's description of the Legislator in *Social Contract*, II, 7 (*Collected Writings*, IV, 154–155).

25. See Plato, *Republic*, X.602c–603a.

26. See Plato, *Republic*, IV.436b–c, V.476d–478e.

27. See Plato, *Republic*, X.603a–b.

28. See Plato, *Republic*, X.603d–e.

29. See Plato, *Republic*, X.603e–604b.

30. See Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 40c.

31. See Plato, *Republic*, X.605b–606b.

32. See Plato, *Republic*, III.388a–b.

33. For Rousseau's analysis of the role of pity in the theater, see *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre* (ed. Bloom, 24–25); *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, chap. I, p. 291 below.

34. See Plato, *Republic*, X.606c.

35. See Plato, *Republic*, 606e–607a. Rousseau writes "Glaucus" here and in the next paragraph when he appears to mean "Glaucon," Socrates' main interlocutor in the *Republic*. Glaucus is the sea-god discussed by Socrates in Book X of the *Republic* (611d) and by Rousseau in the *Second Discourse* (*Collected Writings*, III, 12).

36. See Plato, *Republic*, X.607b–c.